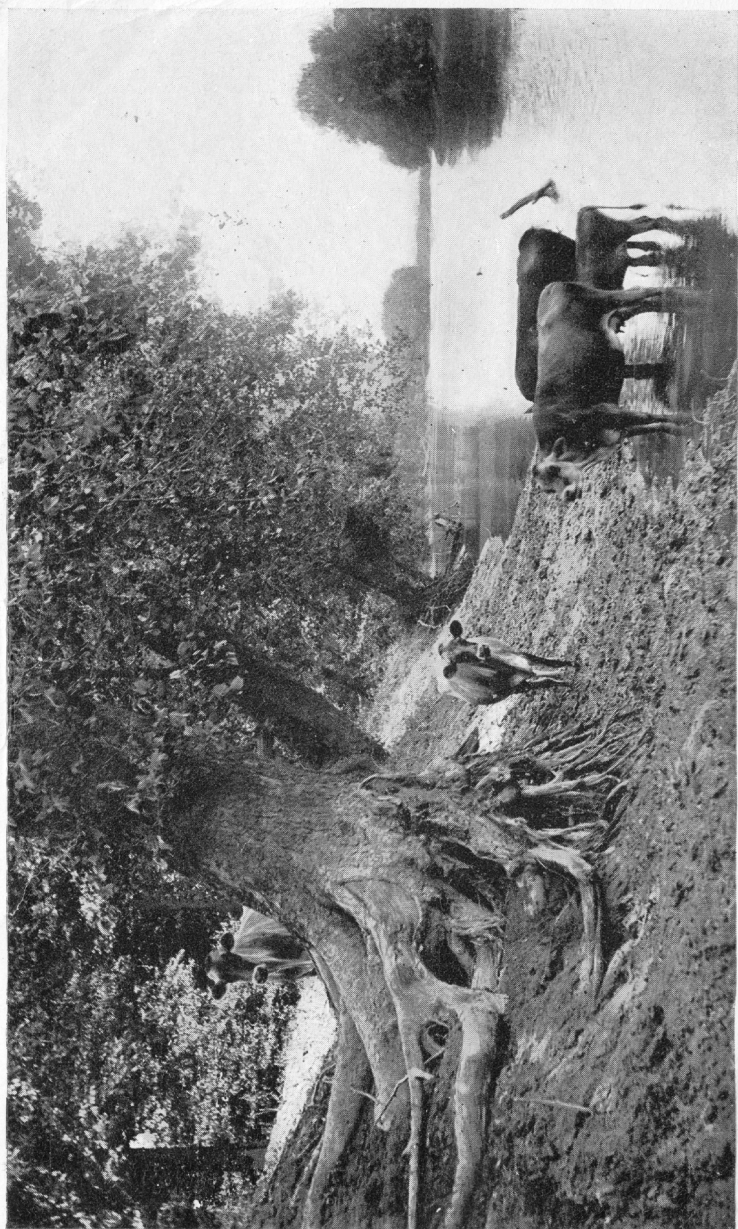


The map depicts the town of Antonia, Nebraska, with the following details:

- Sections:** 15, 16, 21, 22, 27, 28.
- Town Name:** ANTONIA (centered in section 21).
- Water Features:** A river or stream flows from the top left, through section 21, and towards the bottom right.
- Landowners and Acreage:**
 - Top row: Fra. Eick (51), Jas. R. Sherman (80), Fra. Fischer (80), John Peter Speck (120), Carl Mink (40), Ale. Mei.
 - Section 16: Wm. Kraus et al (120).
 - Section 15: Frank Fischer (120), Anno Kniff (199), K. Kieff (40), Emel. Buech (40).
 - Section 21: Chas. Decker (80), Wm. Straker (100), F.W. Wangeher (40), Jas. Klazble (210), Fred Albert (114.89), Louis Kohler (80), Henry Hemme (40), Henry Hemme (80).
 - Section 22: Adol. Buechting (1150).
 - Section 27: Valhaus Realty Co. etal.
 - Section 28: August Kochble (266), Edw. Gleason (63), August Fullack (120), J. Frankfurter (60), J. Frankfurter (45.50), F. Hedde (48), Effie Barck.
 - Other: Mary Meyer (133), Edw. Bergmeyer (42), Zimman (38), Ben. Friedman (100), man (80), orge rtin (6), nry ehla (60).
- Other Labels:** SUR. 1696, SUR. 19.

Antonia



1754 On the Meramec near St. Louis. Mo.

“Not even from a place, just from near a place.”

This line from a Flannery O’Connor story has stayed with me since I first read it as a teenager. It felt, and still feels, recognizable, true.

Antonia had a sign—“Welcome to Bulltown”—and a fire department and sometimes you could even find it on a map. It did not have sidewalks or a zip code (the post office had closed in 1905) or a what you might call any sense of community.

I never read about or saw anything that looked like where I grew up. I was always on the lookout, but the depictions of rural areas I encountered didn’t feel familiar, seemed to picture a world that was too remote, too friendly, too simple, too impoverished, too sinister, or too romantic.

When I was younger I used to wonder about Antonia’s history. It seemed almost as if it didn’t have one, or at least, I didn’t know where or how I could find it. It’s only recently that I’ve started to amass a little collection of books, pamphlets, and newspaper clippings, and begun to realize sifting through the bits and pieces that it’s a strange and fascinating story. I’ve tried, too, to remember what it was like, which has been a little like waiting for your eyes to adjust in a darkened room and then feeling surprised at how much you can see.

This is an attempt to capture what I know, what I’ve learned, and what I remember about Antonia.

Storytelling, part 1

“The real flesh-and-blood gut story of Antonia probably never will be written.”

– D.B. Heinze, “Bulltown Name Comes from Roving Cattle,”
Jefferson County Journal, Wednesday, September 22, 1976

History, part 1

“Preservation of historic sites is the obligation of every citizen...The accumulative evidences of the past contribute a significant spiritual, moral and physical force, and make an indispensable contribution to the artistic and cultural life of the county.”

– Walter L. Eschbach and Malcolm C. Drummond, *Historic Sites of Jefferson County, Missouri*, 1968

“Jefferson County, sandwiched between St. Genevieve and St. Louis counties, has suffered among its own citizens an overshadowing and neglect of a romantic history.”

– Mary Joan Boyer, *Jefferson County, Missouri in Story and Pictures*, 1956, p.93

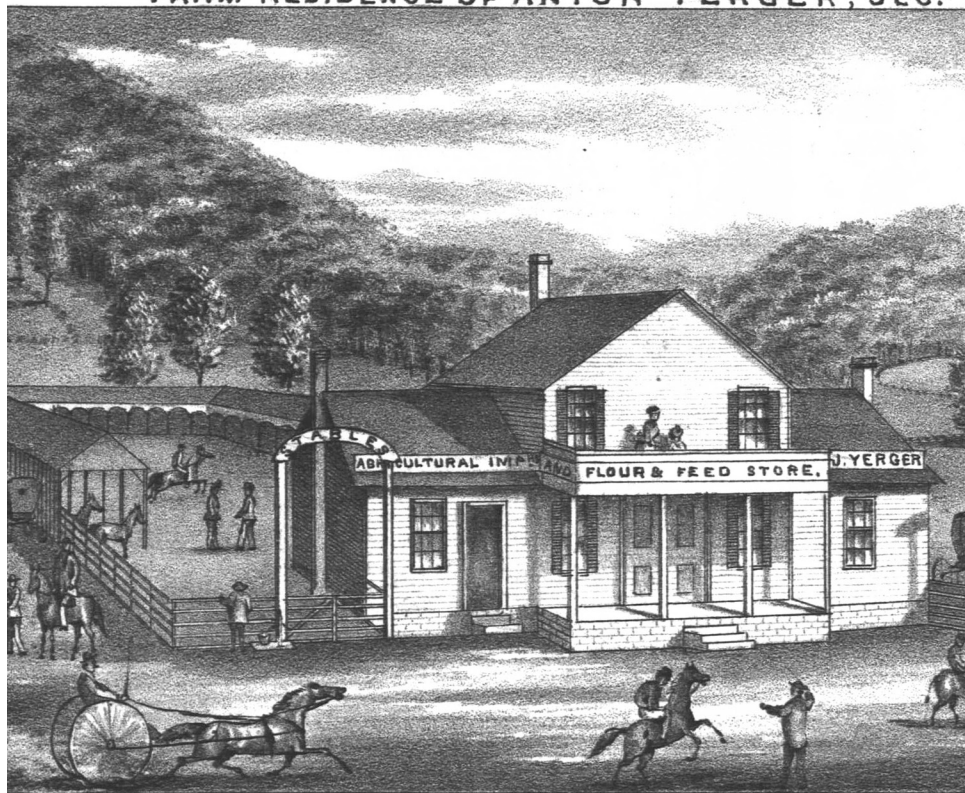
“Today, as had already happened to so much of our heritage and resources, the creamery is gone, the log cabin is gone, the big old frame house is gone, the water is unsafe, the spring is dying of neglect.”

– D.B. Heinze, *Jefferson County Journal*, “The Creamery Prominent in Antonia History,” Wednesday, October 20, 1976

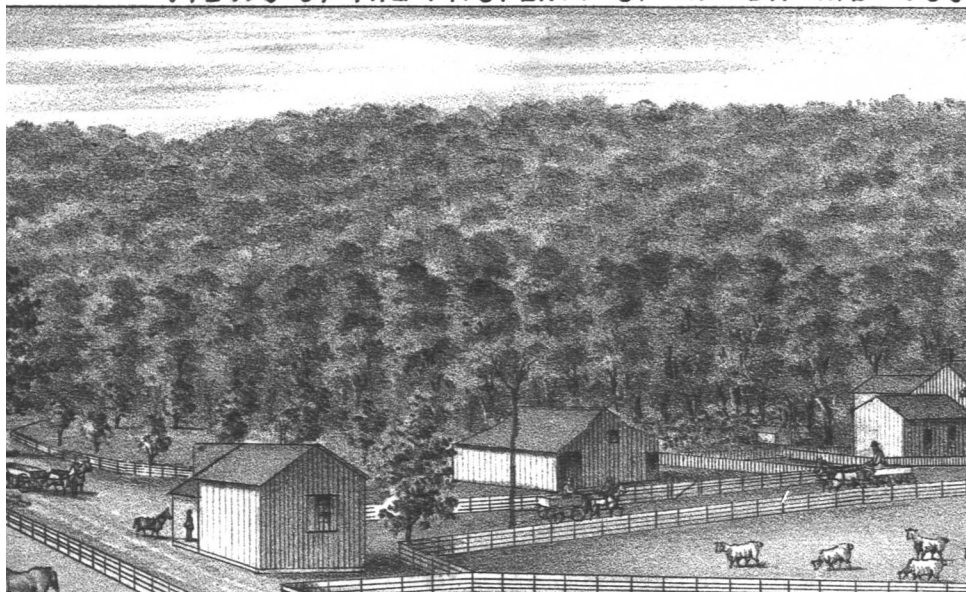
“American Indians lived in the area, and settlers followed the establishment of the ferry, but the largest influx was of the Germans, who in many cases farmed and lived on the land owned by English settlers...Services at St. John’s Lutheran Church...were in the old language right up to the beginning of World War II, when the German language and other traces of Teutonic culture were excised.”

– Chris Carroll, “Communities Disappeared as County Grew,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Monday, February 15, 1999

FARM RESIDENCE OF ANTON YERGER, SEC.



TOWN PROPERTY OF JOSEPH YERGER
VIEWS OF THE PROPERTY OF ANTON AND JOSEPH YERGER



In school history is boring and faraway, nothing but memorizing dates and learning about men with beards and guns. It doesn't answer any of the questions I have, like what it was like to be a 9-year-old girl back then or what foods people ate or how they went to the bathroom. In fourth grade we spend the entire year rehearsing a play about the history of Missouri. The name of the production, unbelievably, is *The Missouri Play*. It is hard to know who to feel worse for: us kids who have been given no choice about singing and dancing about Lafayette and Taum Sauk Mountain and General Pershing and the dogwood tree; our teachers, who have to endure this every other year; or our parents, who must sit in the audience for several hours, patient and polite but certainly fatigued and desperate, like nominees at an award show who know they will leave empty handed.

Anyway, the play doesn't fool anyone: real history is something that happens somewhere else, on one coast or the other, in important cities to important people.

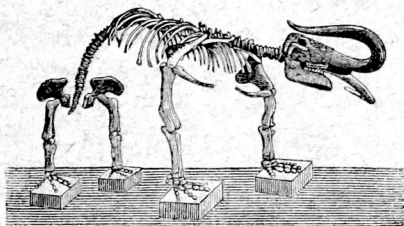
Outside of school, though, there's evidence that history may be something else. There are old farmhouses, cabins, ruins of a stone building in the woods. There are fossils and arrowheads at the creek, small hills we don't realize are Native American mounds, faint petroglyphs that can be seen by those who know where and how to look for them. Some of this is apparent, but more of it is invisible, even though it's all around, right in front me.

Keokuk

DESCRIPTION

OF THE

MISSOURIUM,



OR

MISSOURI LEVIATHAN.

SECOND EDITION, ENLARGED.

LOUISVILLE, KY.

PRENTICE AND WEISSINGER, PRINTERS.

1841.

LIBRARY
baf
SUNSHINE BOOKS
1848 1849

The strangest tourist destinations are the ones where there is nothing to see. The kind of historic site or park where there's just a plaque telling you what happened, what you missed. Mostly these places aim to educate, but sometimes they also ask you to have faith and imagination, to help make a presence where there is an absence. Usually it is a site of a victory or surrender or where a document was signed or a structure was built but then destroyed or something exciting or terrible occurred.

The park near my home was a meeting place of mastodons.

Mastodons are like elephants, only extinct. They are also like woolly mammoths, just not as popular. The story properly begins during the Ice Age, I suppose, but I'm going to skip ahead a bit: In the 1800s an amateur archaeologist heard rumors of a nearby bone bed. He came to the site, dug up some bones and fossils and things, and put them on display in his museum in St. Louis, about 30 miles away. Thinking he had discovered something new, he named his creature the *Missourium* and took it on tour across the ocean. But the British saw that it was just a poorly assembled mastodon, some bones in the wrong places, some from entirely different animals. They reassembled and kept it.

In the 1970s, locals who lived near this bone bed took an interest in it, wanted to protect it. A group of women—housewives, they were called in the newspaper stories, likely because it would've been unthinkable to have called them what their actions made them: activists—raised money to buy the plot from the government, which still owned it from having purchased adjacent land for the new highway. They

thought it should be a park, and so they held bake sales, pooled funds, harangued local companies and politicians. Incredibly, they succeeded.

A paleontologist visited the park. He discovered evidence that the area was not just a gathering place for mastodons, but people, too, and at the same time, which is a big deal, if you know about that sort of thing. After that there were even more who came, people with degrees and expertise to conduct one excavation after another, as if the ground would never run out of things to give them. I picture them getting off the plane and driving out there, watching the city turn into the country and the buildings turn into fields, wondering just how much farther, anyway.

Today the mastodon skeleton standing in the lobby of the park's small museum is not from the local bone bed but a replica and everything that has been found in the bed has been taken away, somewhere far off where none of the locals is ever very likely to ever visit.

History, part 2

“A surprising number of businesses had sprung up in Antonia by 1874, when the little settlement decided to become a town.”

– D.B. Heinze, “Businesses Spring up in Antonia by 1874,”
Jefferson County Journal, Wednesday, October 13, 1976

“...[besides] a hotel...the town also had a blacksmith shop, a wagon maker’s shop...The store was first started by Joseph Yerger...[who] later opened a farm machinery shop...and also a livery stable...attached was a small shop where Frederick Geib had a shoe-maker’s shop...William Wiese had a shoe repair shop and a handle factory...Fred [Heiligttag] opened a funeral parlor in town...Julius and Meana Kohler had a store and a saloon...John Kassel ran a little store just across the little bridge...and the Heiligtags operated a casket house nearby...a post office was built...in 1922 a bank building was erected...”

– D.B. Heinze, “Businesses Spring up in Antonia by 1874,”
Jefferson County Journal, Wednesday, October 13, 1976

“In its heyday in the mid-1800s, Antonia was the site of [a] number of exciting events, including barroom brawls, shootings, malicious and suspicious fires, barn dances and bank robberies.”

– Susannah Webb, “Docile Antonia: Town with Colorful History,” *Courier Journal*, Wednesday, April 3, 1991

“The town had its madam and more than its share of young hotheads...in those days, when the sun went down on a picnic behind the saloon on weekends and the dancing grew more lively and a man had slaked

his thirst to a point where he feared no evil and his strength knew no bounds, trouble was fife to erupt. There are tales of other young men from outlying communities who, having heard of the lively action in Antonia on Saturday nights, decided to match skills at hell-raising with the lads of Bulltown. The wise ones brought along friends to carry them out of town.”

– D.B. Heinze, “Bulltown Name Comes from Roving Cattle,” *Jefferson County Journal*, Wednesday, September 22, 1976

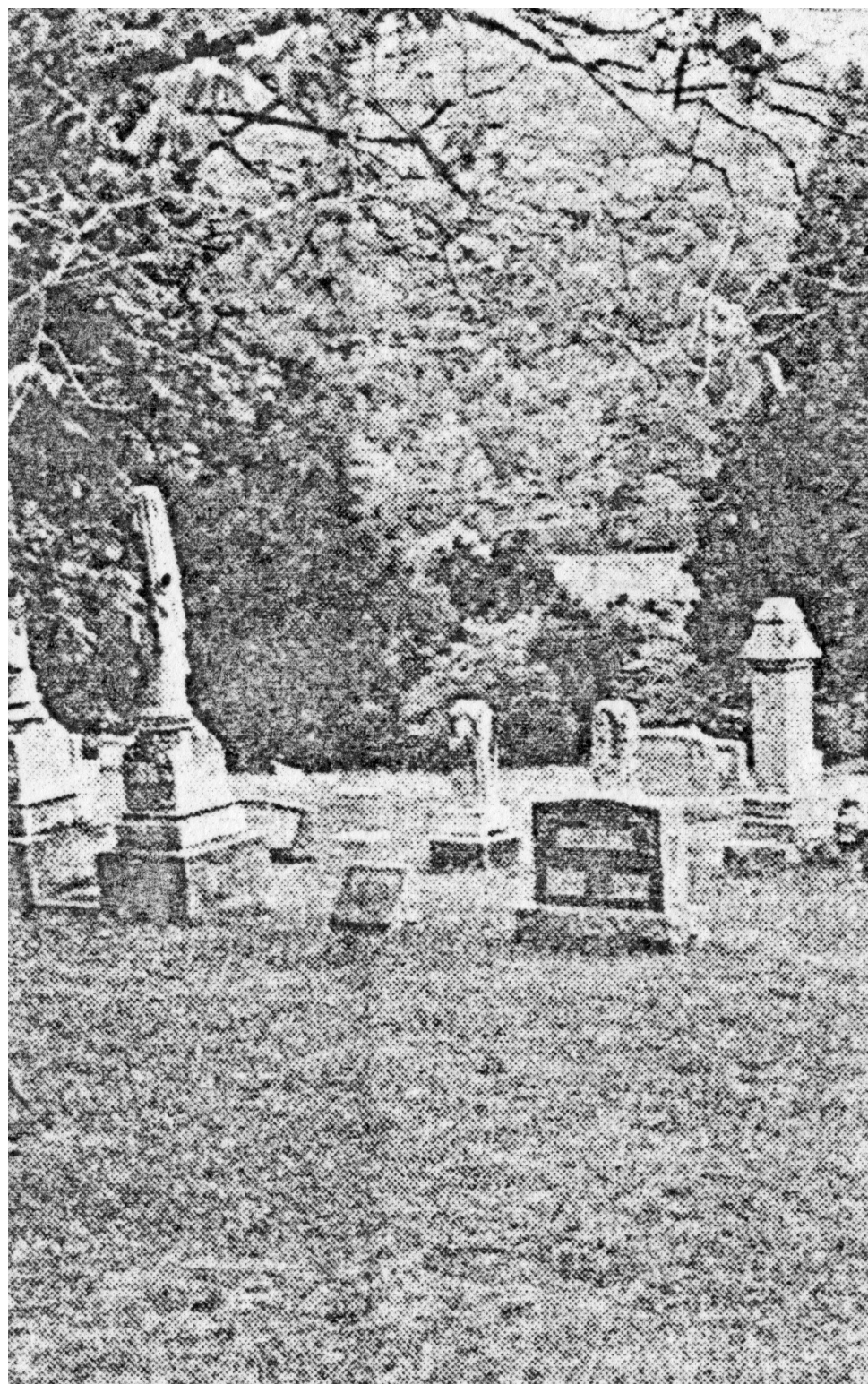
“At one time, people traveling by wagon along what is now Old Lemay Ferry Road would pick up rocks as they approached Antonia to prepare themselves for that evening’s inevitable rock fight.”

– Susannah Webb, “Docile Antonia: Town with Colorful History,” *Courier Journal*, Wednesday, April 3, 1991

Disclaimer

“Lest we give you the wrong impression of Antonia let it be clearly stated that it was never a den of inequity, that the people who settled here were good German stock for the most part.”

– D.B. Heinze, “Bulltown Name Comes from Roving Cattle,”
Jefferson County Journal, Wednesday, September 22, 1976



There's a cemetery near our house. There are no streetlights and at night the hundred-year-old, bone-white stone pillars seem to turn into ghosts. Some afternoons I walk there with the girl who babysits me. It is something to do, somewhere to go, the only other options are the creek in the woods and Poogie's to buy candy bars. Five years older than me, she is sophisticated and wise. She insists on walking around the plots rather than over them, cemetery etiquette I take very seriously for ages after.

The sign says that Antonia Cemetery was founded in 1880, back when the place was still a town and the town was brand new. It's one of the oldest places you can go in the area, which makes it seem exciting and important to me, evidence of an otherwise elusive history. Some of the oldest headstones are in German, neither of us can read them. In the front there is a row of lambs, gravestones of children—siblings—who died nearly a century ago. I am careful around them, they're like the story that I know the ending of but always cry at anyway. And then there are the families who founded the town. They're gathered in little bouquets, royalty of a minor dominion: Kohlers, Morses, Heiligtags. There is a homemade marker in the very back made out of rocks and geodes and concrete that is strange and beautiful and makes me want to know more about the remembered and the maker, about their relationship. Near the entrance is the headstone of the town's founder, Anton Yerger, as if he is determined to play the same role in death as in life: ambassador to this place.

When I turn 16 I get my driver's license, which my mother says gives you the freedom to go anywhere, so I go to other

cemeteries. I begin with ones nearby, Kimmswick and Richardson, so old and small and hidden that to be there feels like being told a secret. Eventually I go a little farther, into St. Louis County to see the shaded, ornate mausoleums of New Mt. Siani and the mosaic monuments terracing the hillside at Resurrection and the staggering army of white stones facing the Mississippi at Jefferson Barracks. And then I go farther still, all the way to North St. Louis, to the Victorian garden cemetery of Calvary to visit the grave of Tennessee Williams. I stare at the slab of pink granite and feel bad for him; he had never intended to return to St. Louis.

But this is an odd choice for what to do with your spare time, and when you make an odd choice people want to know why. Sometimes I mumble something about *Harold and Maude* because it seems funny or easy or true. Sometimes I think but don't say that early on I discovered entirely by accident the power these places have to shift the focus, remind me to be compassionate.

Advantages

“For the lover of nature, the scientist, the artist, the writer, Jefferson County has been an earthly Happy Hunting Ground.”

– Mary Joan Boyer, *Jefferson County, Missouri in Story and Pictures*, 1956, p.8

“The Grand Glaize. This is another French name and signifies ‘Grand Red Earth.’ The clay lands of the hill country around Bulltown, no doubt, were the cause of its name. The word Grande in this case does not mean big or large, but beautiful, magnificent. And in this sense it has the right appellation, for the clay hills of the Glaize can not be exceeded for their surpassing beauty.”

– John L. Thomas, “The Rivers of Jefferson County,” *Missouri Historical Review*, Volume 2, 1908, p.192

“Antonia boasts many distinctions, including the first funeral parlor in Jefferson County, and the only Horse Thief Association still extant in Missouri.”

– Edward Staat, “Antonia Memories—Names and Places from Another Time,” *Jefferson County Journal*, Wednesday, July 20, 1977

“Not least among the treasures of Jefferson County must be its wild life. Because of the infinite variations of its terrain nearly all birds and animals found in other southern and southerneastern states are native here.”

– Zoe Booth Rutledge, *Our Jefferson County History*, 1970, p.184



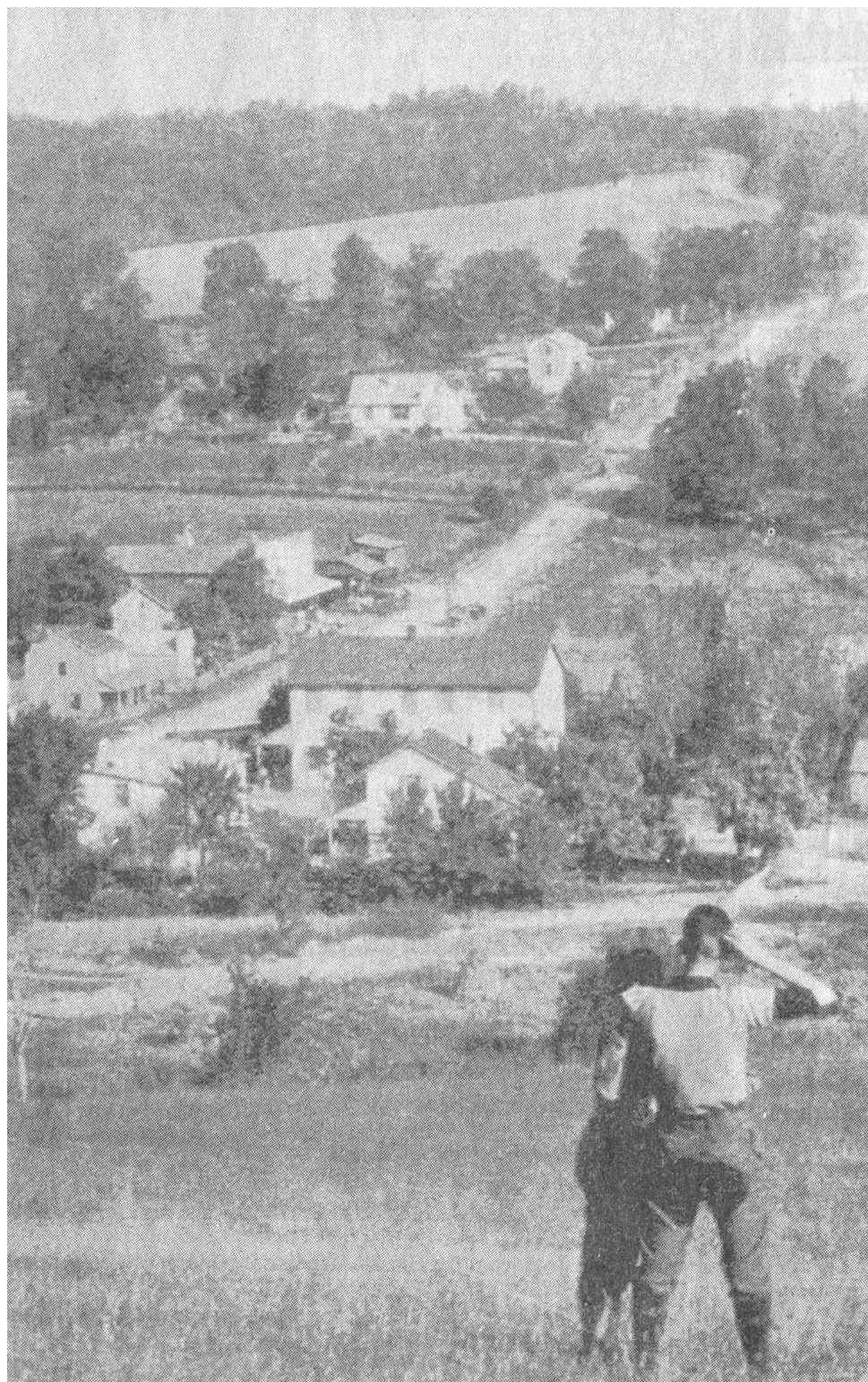
BARNHART, MO.

VIEW OF GLAIZE CREEK. 6-24-1910

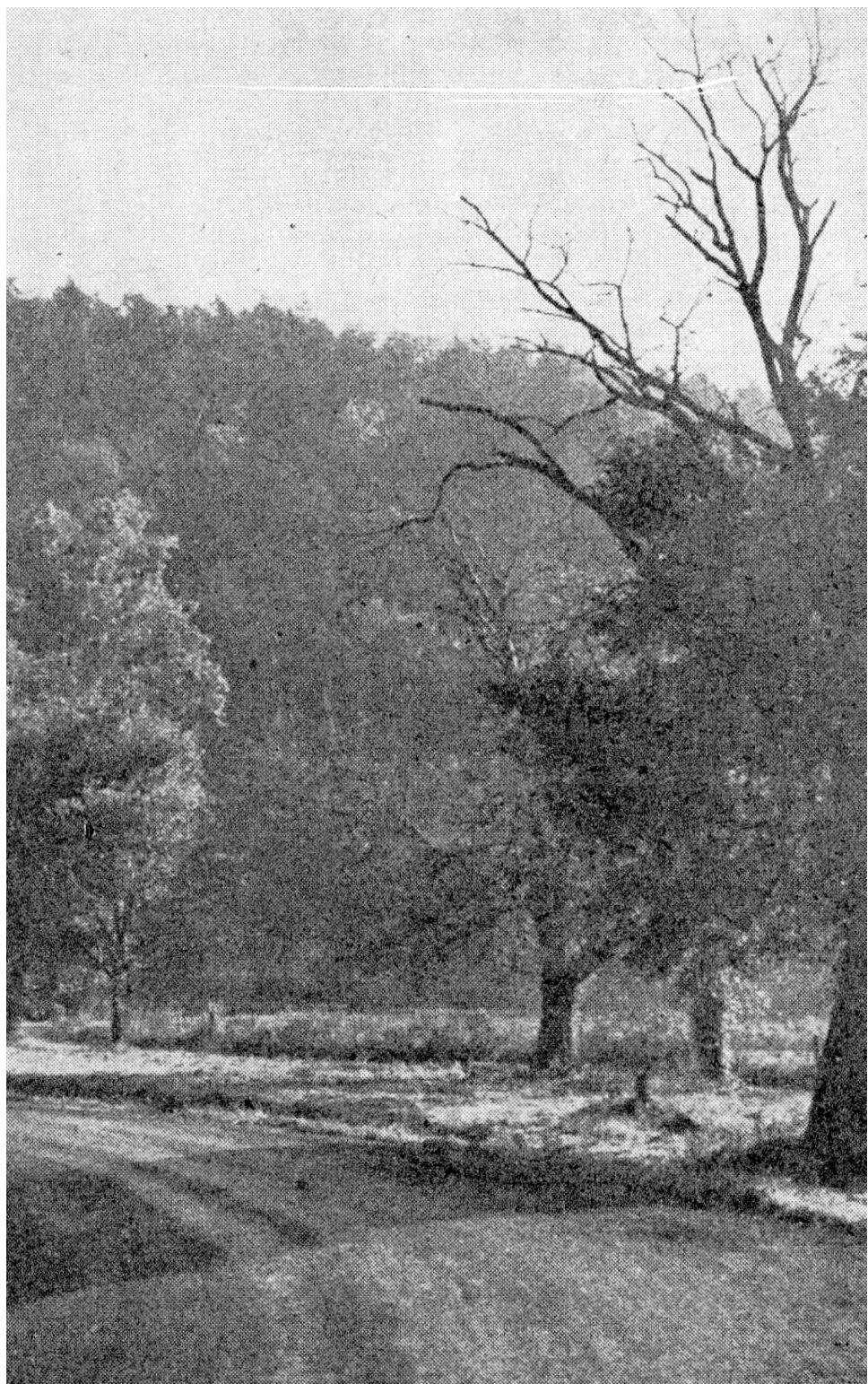
Arthur & Walter.

When I am 10 I know that summer is the best season and Antonia is the best place. How could you ever feel bored when there is so much to do? Play in the creek, set off fireworks, visit the covered bridge, eat ice cream sandwiches on the back-porch swing, go to the cemetery, run around the woods, memorize stories from *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* to tell at campfires, have picnics in the backyard, catch lightning bugs, look for wild blackberries.

In the 1940s my grandparents left St. Louis for some land of their own, so they could have a farm and grow their own food, so their children could breathe clean air, not the black smog that shrouded the city. Decades later my parents decide to go further south, where the land was cheap and the houses were few. They found a little house on a little piece of land, for a while grew fruit trees, planted a vegetable garden. The gift my grandparents had given my mother and her siblings was the same my parents gave to me, one of the best I have ever received: an expansive frontier of a yard and nearby woods with a creek, full of things to discover, with stars at night and room to build summer bonfires and places to look for fossils and arrowheads.



People seem to think there's nothing to hear out here, that if you take away all of the sounds of the city there must be nothing at all. But of course this isn't true. There are the birds that sing and coo and cry and shriek; at dawn, in the spring, they're loud enough to wake you up. And then at night during the summer there are the crickets, solid and constant like the roar of the ocean or a snowstorm, some years the apocalyptic din of cicadas, too. There is the hum and hush of the freight train, four miles away, most easily heard at night, and most easily my favorite. There are sounds of people, too: the buzz of three wheelers along the power line in the woods behind our house, a popular pastime my sixth-grade teacher warns us against. There's the banging and belching of the neighbor boys working on their cars, a set of otherwise quiet, mild-mannered brothers who spend all their free time constructing engines that growl and roar. There's the quarry a mile away that, despite our second-grade teacher instructing us to write letters (using paper usually reserved for penmanship practice) asking them not to move in (I realize later, our first protest letters), takes up residence across the street from the elementary school to mine its seemingly endless granite bluffs. Its dull blasts can be heard and felt at our house not quite a mile away, where the wood floors tremble and kitchen cabinets rattle, pulse like a living thing. There are gunshots, too, always far off in some indistinguishable elsewhere. They are never upsetting or ominous, simply the noise of hunting or target practice, of a hobby, of everyday life.



Every May, Antonia Elementary hosts a carnival. This is not quite as good as Christmas or Halloween or my birthday, but it's close. I look forward to it for weeks, try to imagine what rides will be there, what prizes the booths might have, what junk food I will get from the concession stand. Not every school gets to have its very own carnival, so I'm pretty sure that this is evidence that we're important in some way. I don't really understand that carnivals are designed specifically to go to small, out of the way places.

One year my mother is part of the PTA. She's volunteered to pick up items that stores have donated for the bingo game prizes. We drive around the neighboring towns, get a first aid kit from the hardware store, a cooler from K-Mart, a gift card from Baskin-Robbins. At the Hallmark store, the woman at the counter gives us a stuffed animal: a bear in a duck suit. This is not a character from a book or movie or TV show, and the bear comes with no explanation of its costume.

It is love at first sight. I try to bargain with my mother, convince her that no one needs to know that this bear was ever donated, that she could easily look the other way and it could be mine forever. She is unmoved.

The day of the carnival is perfect, the round up and tilt-a-whirl and candy apples and cotton candy. In the afternoon after I have used up all of my ride tickets, I go inside the school and watch the cakewalk in one of the kindergarten classrooms. Eventually, I climb the stairs to the gym, where bingo is being held. I figure I might as well play a round or two.

Not long after I enter, the next prize is brought out: the stuffed bear. My heart beats hard, I am sure it was meant to be. I give the bingo card my full concentration, putting the chips down as quickly as the numbers are called. When I get a full row, I call out Bingo! in excitement and disbelief. The bear and I are reunited.

At some point the carnival stops coming to the school. I never find out why. For years after, well into adulthood, I hang onto the bear in the duck suit. How could I part with the reminder of my ridiculously good fortune?

Bulltown

“Whether the name ‘Bulltown’ predated the name Antonia is open to question, but as late as 10 or 15 years ago one heard the latter name used as much as the formal name.”

– D.B. Heinze, “Bulltown Name Comes from Roving Cattle,” *Jefferson County Journal*, Wednesday, September 22, 1976

“Old Lemay Ferry Road used to be the only road from Hillsboro to St. Louis. They used to run cattle along there. That was why it was called Bulltown.”

– Ruth Wingbermuehle quoted in Robert Kelly, “Town Looks Like a Postcard from the Past,” *Jefferson County Post*, December 28, 1998

“Perhaps because the name, ‘Antonia,’ suggested Spain and bullfighting, or that cattle, especially bulls, were raised in large numbers on farms near Antonia, also it was said that bullfighting was actually practiced at one time in Antonia.”

– Mary Joan Boyer, *Jefferson County, Missouri in Story and Pictures*, 1956, p.63–64

“Some of the men loitering in the saloon were discussing the possibility of naming the town, proposing and discarding possible names, when one enterprising young gentleman, seeing two young bulls fighting on a nearby hillside, suggested that Bull Town suited the place just right. After hilarious laughter, the men, being in a convivial mood, carried a gallon of whiskey

to the nearby butternut tree, poured it over the roots of the tree and dedicated the town to the bulls.”

– Ed Staat, “Antonia Memories—A Daring Bank Robbery, A City Called Bulltown,” (unknown publication and year)

Storytelling, part 2

“If anyone should ask us if we could swear that what we have written is absolutely accurate, we would have to reply that we could not because we were not among those present when that history was in the making. Even if we had been present, our views of certain subjects would not have coincided with the opinions of others, as no two people see things exactly alike. Therefore, all we can do in writing this story of Jefferson County, Missouri, is to, as carefully as it is humanly possible, sift all information offered thoroughly and trust that, if discrepancies occur, they will be only minor ones.”

– Mary Joan Boyer, *Jefferson County, Missouri in Story and Pictures*, 1956, “Introduction”

Poogie's
ANTONIA MARKET

"HOME OF FINE MEATS"

• LIQUOR • GROCERIES • PRODUCE

NEW KOOL
NATURAL



My high school boyfriend lives in the suburbs, he's the first person I've ever been really close to that is from somewhere else. Why is the market called Pookie's? He says it slowly—Poooh-Geees—as if he can't believe it's a real word and he's saying it. Because that's his name, I say. But what's his *real* name? I shrug. It had never occurred to me that there could be a name more real than what everyone called him.

The market is one of the few still-standing structures that had been built in the early days of Antonia, it's over a hundred years old. Mostly we buy odds and ends there, but the closest grocery store isn't that close, so some people use it for the bulk or entirety of their shopping, pushing a cart around the tiny aisles, mercilessly loading up the one conveyor belt at the one cash register with seemingly endless items. There is a tiny produce section in the far back corner with iceberg lettuce, carrots, Red Delicious, and Bartlett pears, and then beyond that a meat counter, a dairy section, canned goods, packaged products, and box mixes. Most importantly: there's a display of old fashioned stick candy at the front door, a Hostess display at the back, and candy bars and the freezer with individual popsicles and ice cream sandwiches in between the two. For a little while, when I'm 10 or so, there's even a magazine rack with issues of *Betty and Veronica* and *Mad* magazine, which seems like it must be stocked especially for me. There are Pepsi and Coca-Cola machines on the porch that sit on either side of the entrance; a miracle, you can get any kind of soda you want, day or night.

Poogie is friendly, kind, has a big laugh, a red face. He knows everyone that comes in, greets them. He calls me not by my name but nickname when he sees me.

The idea of home is so simple here. It's just somewhere you are recognized and welcomed, isn't it?

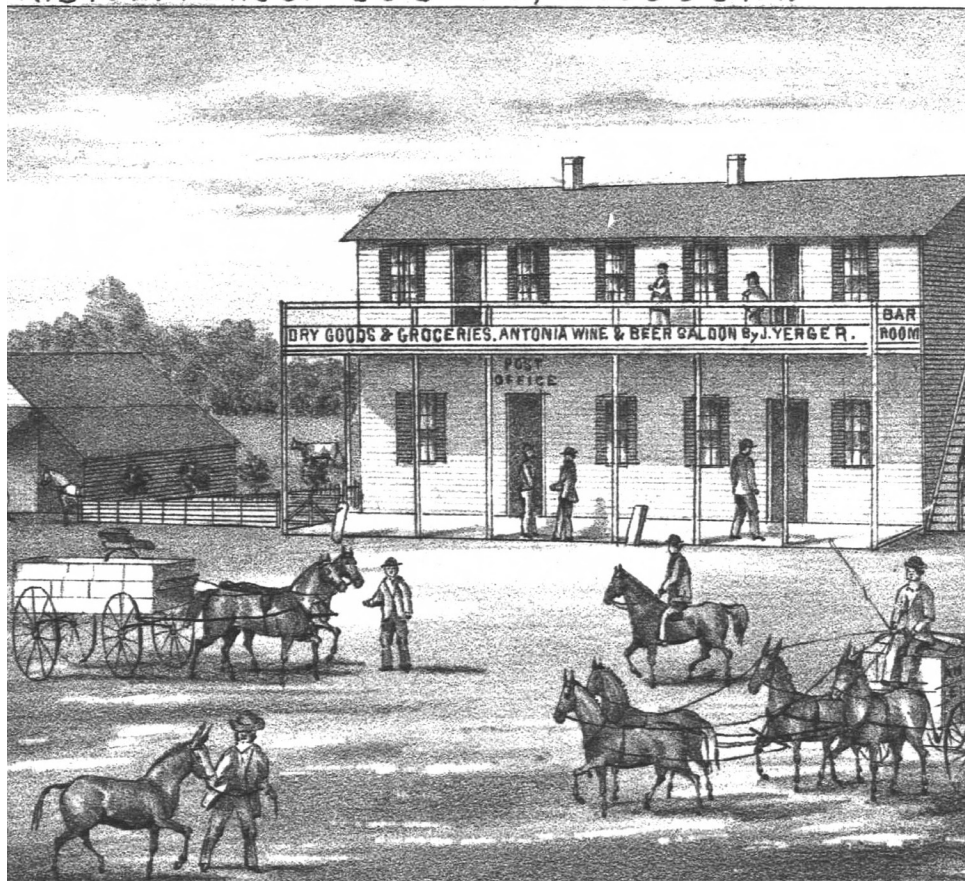
History, part 3

“...the old patterns of living are rapidly passing into the limbus of forgotten lore. Therefore I write with a sense of urgency to record them before it is too late, realizing that many of them have been forever lost.”

– Zoe Booth Rutledge, *Our Jefferson County History*, 1970,
“Foreword”



R. S. JEFFERSON COUNTY, MISSOURI.



ANTONIA, JEFFERSON COUNTY, MISSOURI.
VERGER AT ANTONIA, JEFFERSON COUNTY, MO.



My father visits abandoned houses. Well, by “visits” maybe I mean “break in.” Is it breaking in if no one’s there? If it’s just old stuff someone left behind?

I mean, of course it is, of course I know that. But somehow it’s hard to admit. It’s a hobby that now strikes me as exciting but maybe also embarrassing, eccentric but practical, especially in the middle of nowhere, where places can sit empty for who knows how long.

When I am very young he takes me along sometimes. I can picture the rooms now, I think, but I’m not really sure. Sometimes it’s hard to tell what’s a memory and what’s a story that you’ve been told.

When I am very young, once, or more than once, maybe, he takes me along to an old, deserted funeral home a half mile from our house. I want to say that it was at the “center” of the “town” but neither of those words seem quite right; more accurate to say that it was one of the buildings—along with a still functioning market, tavern, bank, fire station, and insurance agency—that stood at a four-way stop marking the place where a town had once been.

The funeral home was built in the late 1800s, a two-story building with Roman columns, grand and imposing and entirely out of place. It doesn’t make any sense alongside farmhouses and cornfields. In the 1970s the brothers who owned it decided to relocate the business to a town further north, closer to St. Louis, and so the building just sat empty. An article in a 1976 issue of the local paper declared it “a historic and attractive addition to Antonia, it is hoped that

this old building will be restored and returned to service in the future.”

Here is what I remember, or what I think I remember, or what I have imagined that I remember: dark, red walls; high ceilings; Victorian furniture; clutter; boxes; an owl that had made its nest upstairs; the feeling of mystery and excitement.

I can't say for sure what he takes. I know that over time our basement fills up with his finds. The larger, less domestic things are left in the woods that line the edge of the backyard, a weird, rough sculpture park.

A few years later the funeral home is torn down and made into a parking lot, which seems like an obvious cliché until you remember that this was a place that didn't have much need for parking lots.

At some point after he is gone I start cataloging what I have inherited from him, a list made with complete disregard for what kinds of things one can actually inherit: an affection for unconventional ways to close letters, a tendency toward earnestness, but most of all, a love of old things and treasure hunting.

I spend rainy days in the basement looking for treasures of my own, as if here, like in those abandoned buildings, there are different rules: finders keepers. I grow rich in prized possessions: election buttons from the 1970s, black and white snapshots from the 1950s, a schoolbook about World War I. I find a notebook that belonged to him. The first page is the only one with writing: a letter from a teacher dated

a couple of years before he dropped out of school. She tells him that he has improved and that she believes in him, that he will continue to improve if he keeps working hard, keeps going.

Changes

“My native county of Jefferson is changing so rapidly that I feel impelled to write something about my knowledge of the old-time inhabitants, their ways of living, their traditions, ideas and ideals that have helped to make the county great.”

– Zoe Booth Rutledge, *Our Jefferson County History*, 1970, “Foreword”

“Among the many changes that have taken place over the past 30 years are some which have altered the course of the very heartbeat of Antonia. For instance, anyone whose memory goes back to the 1950’s (not to mention the ‘40’s) will recall that in those days the town did not actually come alive until after 8 o’clock in the evening when the farmers, who had been out in the fields since daybreak, would come to town for provisions and supplies. From 8 p.m. until midnight[sic] Antonia hummed with activity and stores did a thriving business...But another day has come to Antonia and much of the rich bottom land that used to produce good food is now overflowing with trailers, housing developments and businesses. Now we buy produce shipped in from California and Florida and Texas and wonder why prices are so high.”

– Ed Staat, “Antonia Memories—A Daring Bank Robbery, A City Called Bulltown,” (unknown publication and year)

“One of Antonia’s oldest residents is Arthur Klable, 88, who always has lived in the area...Klable said Antonia was a thriving town in its own right during his youth and once had three hotels, three taverns

and four gas stations to serve the many people who passed through on Lemay Ferry Road. None of those businesses remains.”

– Robert Kelly, “Town Looks Like a Postcard from the Past,”
Jefferson County Post, Monday, December 28, 1998

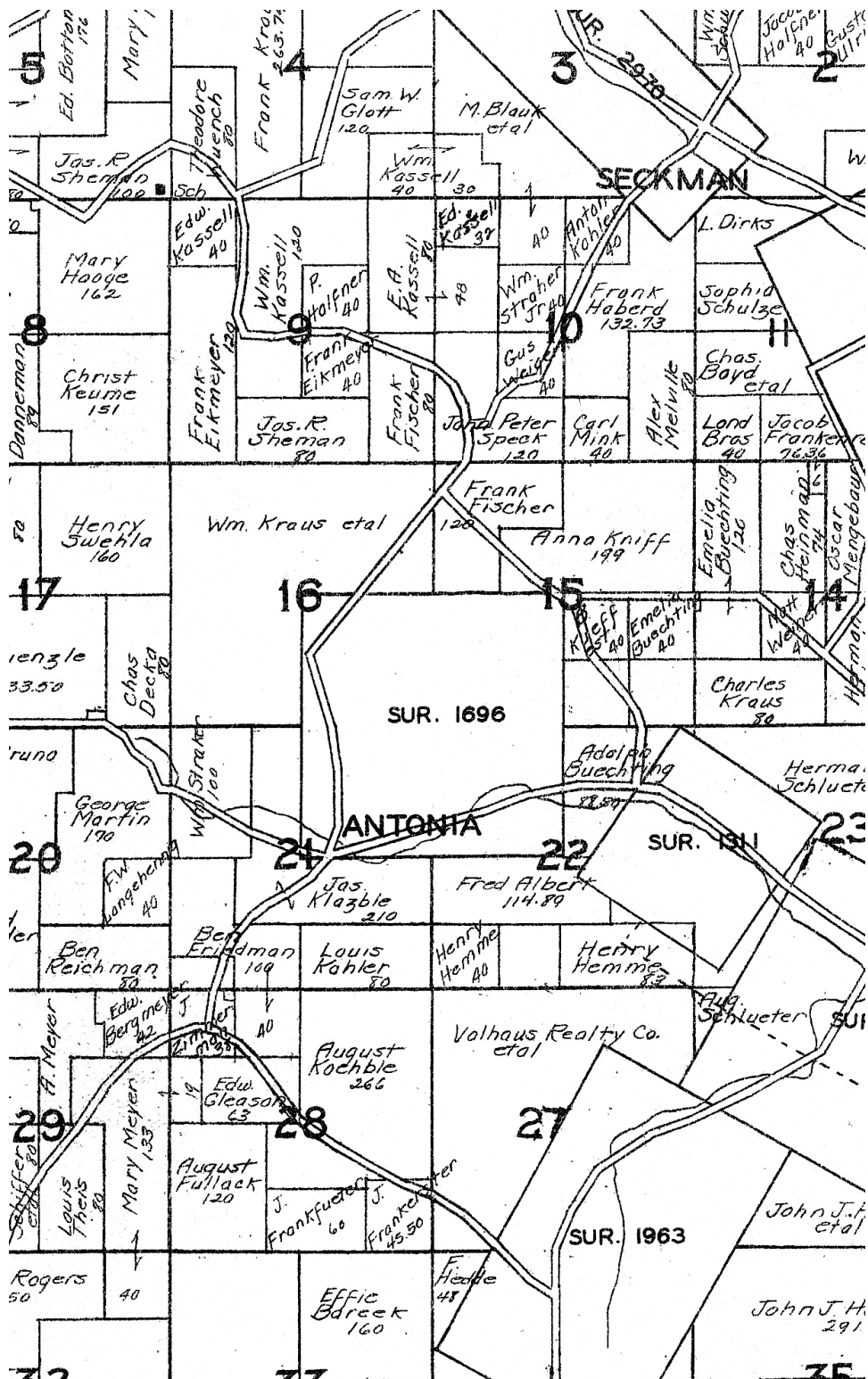


By 17 I hate Antonia with an unrelenting fury. It's an embarrassing place to live, to be from. I hate that there are no sidewalks, no public transportation, that there is, very literally, no way out. In school we read *The Return of the Native* and I sympathize with Eustacia Vye, chafing against the smallness of provincial life. I begin plotting my escape.

The idea was to go to college somewhere far away where no one would know the place or what it meant to be from there. But I go to a state school in Massachusetts and nearly everyone else is from New England. Some hear Missouri and ask me about the Ozarks, which I visited once when I was nine. Others ask where Missouri is. This question, or at the unabashed lack of embarrassment behind it, surprises me. I've had the location of all the states along the coasts memorized since grade school.

In a class called "American Identity" we are asked to write about our ancestors. Like a pop quiz I haven't studied for, I stare at the page, write something vague about farmers in Missouri, Illinois. When we are asked to share our responses, other students mention the pilgrims, the Mayflower.

Outside of class, I work on a zine. I put my grandmother—a beautiful 1920s photo booth strip of images of her, she's young, smiling, her hair is bobbed—on cover of one of the issues. I use a photo of my mother at a high school dance on another. If you didn't know that these women were related to me it might seem like I just like vintage photographs and not that I am making some sort of scrapbook, that far away at school in Massachusetts I am undeniably tethering myself to family, to home.



Antonia as ghost town.

Can a place be a ghost town if there's so little left behind?

No, that's not really fair, the phrase suggests a community that has been abandoned, which is not entirely accurate. Actually, there are more people living there than ever before.

And yet—

A few years ago, my mother sold the house I grew up in and moved to a suburb in the city. Last winter we drove down to Antonia. A few years absence made things look so different, even though the changes had been happening all along, long before she moved. Old Antonia Inn had been torn down years ago, made into a parking lot for the bank. Poogie retired and sold the market; the new owners had run into trouble and gone out of business. There were many more houses than when I was growing up, generic and oddly suburban, strangely crowding each other on these tiny lots out in the wilderness. The woods had been carved up and the bluffs dynamited to make more roads. The farms turned into subdivisions, a couple of which were unsuccessful, abandoned part of the way through. Actual ghost towns, I suppose.

Not exactly rural anymore. But not quite suburban, either. A strange in-between thing, hard to love and hard to let go.

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